22 October 1984

NEWS MEDIA

The Numbers War

Westmoreland's case starts with those who counted.

The soldiers in the field sometimes called them "ghosts": an unseen enemy that planted booby traps and mines, melting into the jungle at night and metamorphosing at sunup into the ubiquitous peasants in the fields. They were old men, women and teenage boys, innumerable—until they were killed, when they could be listed in the body counts compiled daily in Saigon, and their corpses subtracted from the roster of enemy strength in the first war in history in which one side used a computer to tell if it was winning or losing. But not even a computer can count ghosts.

D. McCULLIN—MAGNUM

The Tet offensive: The turning point for public opinion

If *Westmoreland v. CBS, Inc.*, is to turn on the facts of the Vietnam War, the jury will have to pay close attention, for the facts are as maddeningly elusive as the uncounted enemy itself. At the heart of the dispute between the general and the network is an older dispute between rival intelligence services about the strength of the forces opposing Saigon in 1967 and early 1968, just before the fateful Tet offensive. It is a confusing dispute, marked by seemingly arbitrary definitions and esoteric bookkeeping. Were the combined enemy forces no more than 300,000, as military intelligence claimed? Or were they almost twice as numerous, as the CIA suspected? Perhaps more important, which version did Westmoreland believe—and which did he convey to Washington? Ultimately, the truth may not be knowable, given the nature of the war, but that does not relieve the jury of the burden of making up its mind.

Vietnam was a war without fronts, in which conventional measures of success—salients opened, ground captured—had no meaning; territory was friendly as long as Americans were standing on it. By 1966, it had become a war of attrition, in which the only hope for victory was to kill enemy soldiers faster than they could be replaced. And so the official estimates of enemy organization and troop strength, the "order of battle," which in previous wars was just an intelligence tool, emerged with the body count as the most important measure of the success of the American mission and a crucial factor in influencing American public opinion about the war. As long as the enemy was seen to be of manageable size, it was thought that the war could be won with no additional commitment of U.S. troops.

Revisions: But by early 1967, the American consensus over the enemy order of battle was beginning to crumble. At Westmoreland's MACV (Military Assistance Command, Vietnam) Saigon headquarters, the monthly intelligence estimates had enemy strength fluctuating slightly around the number 295,000. But at CIA headquarters back home in Langley, Va., analysts using essentially the same raw data had come to believe that the true figure was far higher, perhaps as much as 593,000. The CIA's sharp upward revision, which eventually persuaded some key officers on Westmoreland's own staff, including his chief of intelligence, Brig. Gen. Joseph A. McChristian, touched off a bitter debate between the two intelligence services. It was to be resolved in MACV's favor, but not before Westmoreland apparently gave several colleagues the clear impression that, having assured President Johnson that the war was

Continued

going well, he wanted to avoid ·y embarrassing disclosure he enemy was more capable of resistance than anyone had realized. These were the people who provided CBS with the foundation of the challenged documentary.

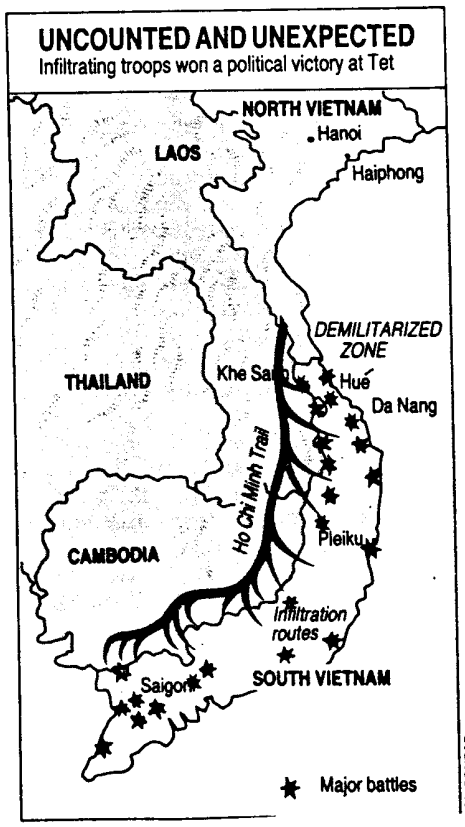
The debate was in part between differing philosophies of intelligence gathering: between the military-intelligence forces, who traditionally have given the greatest weight to "hard" information derived from reconnaissance and communications intercepts, and the civilian analysts of the CIA, who are equally at home with such "soft" data as captured documents and defectors. Military intelligence was designed to deal with an enemy organized along traditional lines, in Western-style hierarchies of uniformed platoons and batallions. But, with the exception of the North Vietnamese regulars, the enemy did not conform to the model. In its monthly order-of-battle summaries, then, the U.S. command divided the enemy forces into four categories: combat troops, which included the regulars of the North Vietnamese Army and organized Viet Cong units; administrative and support troops; political cadres, and "irregulars," a group that included roving guerrilla fighters and the village-based, part-time soldiers of the "self-defense forces." The numbers varied within a narrow range in the spring and summer of 1967: between roughly 110,000 and 121,000 for the combat troops (the actual figures were not rounded off); around 25,000 support troops; 40,000 political cadres, and a total for irregular forces of exactly 112,760 each month from March to July.

EGGLESTON—UPI/BETTMANN ARCHIVE

Westmoreland, U.S. Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker in 1968: Ghosts

Irregulars: These irregular forces were the ghosts, and they were the chief focus of the debate. Back in August 1966, CIA analyst Sam Adams had received at his desk in Langley a captured document, a report from Viet Cong headquarters in Binh Dinh province claiming to have enrolled some 50,000 irregulars. He looked up Binh Dinh in the order-of-battle reports and found that Army Intelligence had listed enemy strength at 4,500. "My God," Adams recalled thinking, when he first told the tale in a Harper's magazine article in 1975, "that's not even a tenth of what the VC say."

Adams continued to gather evidence of enough missing Viet Cong and to pass it along within the agency. In November of 1966, George Carver, a top CIA official, alerted presidential assistant Robert Komer that the irregular forces might have been undercounted by as many as 200,000 men. All that winter and spring, cables flew back and forth between Saigon and Washington; at a conference in Hawaii in February, Adams laid out his theory to the MACV brass, including McChristian. In May the CIA officially notified Defense Secretary Robert McNamara of its higher estimate, at about the same time that the figures finally reached Westmoreland, apparently for the first time, in the form of briefings by McChristian and other officers. It was at one of these briefings that Westmoreland, according to one of the innumerable disputed assertions in the documentary, was reported to have uttered the damning questions: "What am I going to tell the press? What am I going to tell the Congress? What am I going to tell the president?" Indeed, the questions were growing sharper. Approval for the war was waning, Johnson's support in Congress had thinned, and in October the March on the Pentagon would bring out the first masses of Americans to oppose the fighting.



BOB CONRAD

The resolution of the numbers dilemma was hammered out in a series of top-secret meetings under the rubric "Special National Intelligence Estimate." It was decided to drop the self-defense forces entirely from the order-of-battle reports and count only guerrillas. Their number was put at 70,000 to 90,000; with some other adjustments, the total came out just about where it had been all along, around 300,000. Military analysts had contended that the barely trained, minimally armed self-defense forces posed little offensive threat to the American troops. Key CIA analysts argued that with their land mines and booby traps they were costing large numbers of American casualties. It is a legitimate point to disagree about, except perhaps for one thing: since irregulars were still tallied in body counts, and counted when they defected or were captured, to take them out of the order of battle meant that future calculations of enemy strength—and measurements of military progress—would be increasingly skewed.

Raids: The real question in all of this is how it might have affected the battle of Tet, which began with simultaneous attacks across the country, included commando raids on the American Embassy compound in Saigon and 36 of 44 provincial capitals, and raged for five days. After months of enemy infiltration into Vietnam from the Ho Chi Minh Trail—the infiltration rate was also a subject of dispute—there were signs of an impending communist attack around the time of the Vietnamese New Year's holiday, although no one anticipated an action of such magnitude. CBS asserted that if the true size of the enemy forces had been known, American troops might have been better prepared. But Westmoreland has always maintained that Tet was one of America's greatest military victories; the North Vietnamese, who may have had hopes of capturing a major city and sparking a general uprising, achieved neither, and in the end retreated with what are now generally conceded to be enormous casualties.

Tet was the beginning of the end for Americans in Vietnam: the televised sight of commandos inside the American Embassy—not such a common occurrence 16 years ago—helped mobilize public opinion against what seemed like an increasingly futile war. If anything, the real damage done by Tet—the political damage—was made worse by the overly optimistic predictions that had come before it.

JERRY ADLER with NICHOLAS M. HORROCK in Washington